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SUBJECT: INTEREST IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT GROWS IN JAPAN

Classified By: CDA James P. Zumwalt for reasons 1.4b, d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Japan's recent decision to accept some 90 Burmese refugees, makes it the first Asian nation to provide third country resettlement. This cable summarizes two recent symposia held in Japan on resettlement and the experiences of other countries in dealing with refugees. Although Japan's decision to accept third country resettlement is a relatively modest step forward, its efforts could serve as a model to others in the region. Note: Japan's acceptance of almost 11,000 displaced Indo-Chinese between 1978 and 2002 was not a "third country resettlement program." End Summary.

¶2. (U) On February 5, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) hosted a "Symposium on Refugee Resettlement." The event was an opportunity to highlight the pilot program announced in December 2008 to resettle over the next few years a total of 90 Burmese refugees from camps in Thailand. Japan's decision to accept the Burmese makes it the first Asian nation to provide third country resettlement. Daniel Alkhal, Senior Protection Officer, UNHCR Japan, emphasized the great potential of the program, explaining, "Almost half of all refugees worldwide are from Asia, and Japan's proximity and willingness to assist are significant."

¶3. (U) Dominique Collinge, Minister Counselor in charge of Humanitarian Affairs at Canada's UN Mission in Geneva, described his own country's refugee resettlement efforts at the MOFA symposium and stressed the need to both "prepare the recipient community and teach the refugees good skills, particularly language skills." Ponnareth Kugo, whose family was killed by the Khmer Rouge, underscored this point with her own story. She was one of the few Indo-Chinese refugees resettled in Japan, and described in fluent Japanese her experience as a refugee, urging "Please don't look down on us. Give us a chance to learn and we can contribute to your society as equals."

¶4. (U) The Japan Association for Refugees also hosted a "Workshop on Refugee Policy in Korea: Recent Changes and the Role of Civic Society." Hoteag Lee, head of a South Korean refugee NGO, described recent changes in Korean refugee law. Although Korea has only accepted a total of 101 refugees since signing the refugee convention in 1992 (including an additional 71 granted humanitarian stay status), these numbers are increasing. Lee said the newly revised Korean law of December 2008 "is not perfect, but is an improvement. The process will be streamlined a little, and refugees who applied while out of visa status, but whose case is taking too long, will be allowed to work legally," he added.

¶5. (C) Mr. Lee said he had talked with ROK officials and others about the Japanese third country resettlement program. "None of the people I talked to were opposed to the idea of

Korea doing something similar." Soo Jin Hyung, of the Japan Association for Refugees explained, "Japan and Korea are competitive in many areas. We hope to encourage the two countries to compete with each other in improving their programs for refugees." As Mitsuko Shino, Director of MOFA's Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Division, told Embassy Tokyo on the margins of the symposium, "it is often difficult for homogeneous, traditional Asian cultures to accept refugees." That said, "we hope to encourage other Asian nations to do something similar to our program. Asia has the largest percentage of refugees and we want to find a way to cooperate with our Asian neighbors to find a regional solution," she added.

16. (U) Comment: Although Japan accepted a total of 10,941 Indo-Chinese between 1978 and 2002, there are four reasons this is not regarded as a "third country resettlement program." First, before the CPA (Comprehensive Plan of Action) was adopted in 1989, the "Boat People" did not necessarily come to Japan from another asylum country. Others among them had not been recognized as "convention," or UNHCR refugees. Second, although Japan accepted the CPA, it regarded the Indo-Chinese as "persons in need of humanitarian assistance," not as refugees fleeing their country because of persecution. Third, in a resettlement program, assistance for purposes of integration normally starts in the country of asylum. Fourth, UNHCR is the main player in resettlement processes, and in the Indo-Chinese resettlement in Japan, UNHCR played no role in the selection process and very little in after-care programs. End Comment.

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